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ABSTRACT

This paper is part of a series of reports that examine the impact of No Child Left Behind, the newly revised Elementary and Secondary Education Act, on state policy and policymaking. It focuses on standards-based assessment. The first section explains that assessments play a pivotal role in standards based reform by: communicating goals that school systems, schools, teachers, and students are expected to achieve; providing targets for teaching and learning; and shaping the performance of educators, students, and school systems. The second section explains that standards-based assessments differ from their more traditional counterparts because they closely link assessment to curriculum, compare students to a standard of achievement rather than to other students, and incorporate new forms of assessment. The third section discusses validity and reliability as two criteria for sound assessment. The fourth section looks at challenges for standards-based assessment systems, including building state and local consensus, providing strong standards, aligning standards with assessment and instruction, defining progress, using results, including all students, and addressing legal challenges. (SM)

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No Child Left Behind Issue Brief: A Guide to Standards-Based Assessment

Education Commission of the States

2002

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No Child Left Behind Issue Brief

A Guide to Standards-Based Assessment

This is part of a series of ECS reports examining the impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the newly revised Elementary and Secondary Education Act on state policy and policymaking.

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Introduction

Across the nation, states are setting tough new education standards, defining what students should know and be able to do. To help students meet these standards – and to measure their progress in doing so – states are also designing and implementing new assessment systems. These systems are designed to support improved student achievement, but their effectiveness depends on a number of factors.

Standards must be specific enough to enable everyone (students, parents, educators, policymakers and the public) to understand what students need to learn. They also must be precise enough to permit a fair and accurate judgment of whether the standards have been met. While they do not mandate a particular curriculum, textbook or instructional approach, and may be achieved in a variety of ways, standards must make clear what is expected of students.

States and districts use two types of interrelated standards: those that specify the content (what students should know or be able to do at different points in their education), and those that specify the academic achievement standards (how well they should be able to do it). Ideally, academic achievement standards indicate what is required to meet content standards (for example, essay, mathematical proof, scientific experiment, project or exam), as well as the quality of achievement that is deemed acceptable (for example, achieving a certain level of proficiency).

By raising expectations for all students, standards are an important approach in improving education. But standards alone cannot produce the desired improvement. Curriculum specifications and materials, resource guides, professional development and assessments are equally instrumental. Although this paper focuses on assessments, the success of standards-based reform requires a set of systematic changes throughout the education system.

The Role of Assessment in Standards-Based Reform

Assessments play a pivotal role in standards-based reform by:

- Communicating the goals that school systems, schools, teachers and students are expected to achieve
- Providing targets for teaching and learning
- Shaping the performance of educators and students and, ultimately, school systems.

With appropriate incentives and/or sanctions, assessments can motivate students to learn better, teachers to teach better and schools to be more effective.

Assessments communicate goals. All assessments, whether standards-based or not, reveal the expectations of their creators. Students seeking to discern their teachers' wishes often find more clues in past exams than in course syllabi, lectures or reading assignments.[1] Over time, the "tradition of past exams" can effectively define the curriculum – especially when students' achievement on exams carries important consequences.[2]

Assessments provide targets. Assessments not only reveal standards, they also provide achievement targets for instruction. Assessments focus attention on a particular set of skills and knowledge – those that must be mastered to "meet the standard." Assessments offer operational examples of what students should know or be able to do. They also tell students how well they are achieving standards by defining different levels of proficiency.

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A Guide to Standards-Based Assessment (cont'd)

This *ECS Issue Brief* was adapted from *A Policymaker's Guide to Standards-Led Assessment*, by Robert L. Linn and Joan L. Herman, published jointly in February 1997 by ECS and the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing. For more information on the issues discussed in this brief, please visit the ECS Web site at www.ecs.org.

Assessments shape achievement. Standards-based reform hinges on the premise that clear expectations prompt greater effort from both teachers and students on specific achievement targets. The capacity to motivate and focus effort makes the assessment a powerful tool in the teacher's instructional arsenal. Well-conceived assessments focus student attention on the knowledge and skills that are deemed most important to learn. Poorly conceived assessments can prompt students to regurgitate soon-to-be-forgotten facts and figures to secure a passing grade.

Assessments not only shape the behavior of students, but also that of teachers, who often use tests as models for curricular and instructional design. Teachers often help students prepare for tests by devoting substantial instructional time to test-like activities, especially when the pressure for high scores increases.[3] This is another reason well-conceived assessments are so important.

Ultimately, local or state assessments also can shape the behavior of entire school systems. Raising expectations, particularly in the form of tests that have consequences associated with them, can prompt authorities to seek the resources their schools or districts need to help students achieve standards.

What's Different About Standards-Based Assessments?

The use of assessments to increase accountability and stimulate improvement is not unique to standards-based reform. So what makes standards-based assessments different from their more traditional counterparts?

- **Closely links assessment to curriculum.** Most externally imposed assessments measure generic skills and achievements – intentionally separated from any specific curriculum, course of study or content standards. In contrast, standards-based reform advocates a tight alignment between what is taught and what is tested. The power of assessments to shape teachers' practice, once seen as an unfortunate side effect, becomes desirable.
- **Compares students to a standard of achievement, not to other students.** Standards-based assessments compare student accomplishment to pre-established achievement goals, rather than to the achievement of other students. The standard is supposed to be absolute, independent of the proportion of students who meet it. Norm-referenced tests, in contrast, describe what students can do relative to other students. The fact that a student scores at the 60th percentile in mathematics, for example, tells us only that she fares as well as or better than 60% of her peers – not how many mathematical skills she has mastered.

  The current focus on standards mirrors an earlier emphasis on "minimum competency," a reform movement popular in the 1970s and '80s. Then, as now, reformers sought to improve education by holding educators and students accountable for meeting high levels of academic achievement, using tests for high school graduation or grade-to-grade promotion. In contrast to today's reformers, who emphasize high, rigorous standards, the earlier group targeted only basic skills. And unlike the multilevel proficiency categories used in standards-based assessments, minimum-competency tests typically employed multiple-choice items on a pass-fail basis.
- **Incorporates new forms of assessment.** Standards-based assessments often take new forms – requiring students, for example, to write an essay or solve a real-life math problem. These

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"constructed-response" formats are hand-scored using scoring guides based on agreed-upon criteria.

To satisfy these aims, assessments need to have a number of features. Six desirable features of assessments[4] are:

- Assessment tasks should involve activities that are valued in their own right, engaging students in "real-world" problems rather than artificial tasks.
- Assessments should model curriculum reform.
- Assessment activities should focus on objectives consistent with the goals of instructional activities, thus contributing to instructional improvement.
- Assessments should provide a mechanism for staff development.
- Assessments should lead to improved learning by engaging students in meaningful activities that are intrinsically motivating.
- Assessments should lead to greater and more appropriate accountability.

Assuring Quality of Assessment in Standards-Based Systems

What makes for a sound assessment? Two criteria have been established:

- **Validity** – degree to which particular uses/interpretations of assessment results are justified
- **Reliability** – degree to which scores are free of measurement error.

In addition, the assessment should be aligned with standards. Alignment is the degree to which an assessment reflects the standards on which it is based.

Challenges for Standards-Based Assessment Systems

Although standards-based assessment has great potential for supporting improved student achievement and accountability, its effectiveness relies on a number of factors:

- **Building state and local consensus** – If public opinion polls are any indication, the concept that students should be held to high academic standards holds broad support. Such support, however, must be maintained. The diversity of opinion on what students should learn and schools should teach makes it imperative to involve the public in the development or revision of standards and assessments. Building a broad consensus requires not just a series of public hearings and opportunities for input and review but also a comprehensive process that fully involves the public, ensuring its concerns are understood and addressed.
- **Providing strong standards** – To be effective, standards must be written in clear, explicit language that reflects the content of the subject area and is detailed enough to provide guidance to teachers, curriculum and assessment developers, parents, students and others who will be using them. States and districts have been making progress in developing and communicating strong standards.
- **Aligning standards with assessment and instruction** – Ideally, states develop standards first, then follow with the design of assessments that measure the standards. In the early days of standards-based reform, it was not unusual for some states to patch together assessment systems using available assessments. Now states, working cooperatively with test publishers, are creating customized assessments aligned to the state standards.

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Classroom curriculum and instruction should also be aligned with standards and assessments, although fairness demands that students not be held accountable for goals they are unable or have an inadequate opportunity to reach. Therefore, curriculum alignment depends on teachers' ability to understand and obtain the resources and expertise to help their students meet the expectations of assessments.

- **Defining progress** – The progress of schools, districts and states is typically defined by the achievement of successive groups of students. Are more 4th graders, for example, demonstrating proficiency in math standards this year than last? Federal law now defines "adequate yearly progress" of students' achievement on standards-based assessments to determine whether schools and districts are helping all students reach "proficiency."
- **Using results** – How schools use assessment results – whether simply reporting them, at one end of the spectrum, or making graduation contingent on them, at the other – can have profound effects on students. Assessments also can be used to hold educators and schools accountable for students' achievement.
- **Including all students** – Standards are designed to raise expectations for all students. A variety of accommodation strategies may be needed to include limited-English-speaking students and students with disabilities in an assessment, ranging from allotting extra time for students, to translating assessments into other languages. Students with severe cognitive disabilities may require a separate system of assessments.
- **Addressing legal challenges** – Assessments are most likely to face legal challenges when consequences are attached to the results. Challenges also can be expected when assessments produce an adverse impact on historically disadvantaged groups, substantially higher failure rates for black or Hispanic students, for example. Such evidence, by itself, does not establish the unfairness of an assessment or an intent to discriminate. But the identification of an adverse impact can trigger a legal challenge.

Endnotes

1. National Education Goals Panel (1993). *Report of Goals 3 and 4 Technical Planning Group on the Review of Education Standards*. Washington, DC: NEGP.

2. Madaus, G.F. (1998). "The Influence of Testing on the Curriculum." In L.N. Tanner (Ed.), *Critical Issues in Curriculum, Eighty-Seventh Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, part 1, pp. 83-121. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

3. Madaus, p. 93.

4. Linn, R.L., and Baker, E.L. (1996). "Can Performance-Based Assessments be Psychometrically Sound?" In J.B. Baron and D.P. Wolf (Eds.), *Performance-Based Student Assessment: Challenges and Possibilities*. Ninety-Fifth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, part I, pp. 84-103. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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